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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of the need for marketing in continuing education in nursing is justifiable considering the growing pressures for efficiency and economies of scale in this field of higher education. This paper critically analyzes the current utilization of needs assessment in continuing education programs in nursing. It is argued that the cost benefit of a needs assessment can only be realized when the needs assessment is utilized as a framework for subsequent development of a total marketing scheme. More specifically, the paper discusses and illustrates by example, strategies for how a marketing plan can be employed in continuing education programs in nursing in order to: (1) define objectives; (2) examine opportunities and threats; and (3) perform situation and competitive analysis, with relatively low cost to the administrator of continuing education. In this manner it is possible to achieve a more desirable balance between organizational and market needs. A set of guidelines are presented for conducting a comprehensive yet cost efficient marketing analysis to serve as a basis for decision making in a continuing education program in nursing. (Author)

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BEYOND NEEDS ASSESSMENT TO MARKETING CONTINUING EDUCATION IN NURSING

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BEYOND NEEDS ASSESSMENT TO MARKETING
CONTINUING EDUCATION IN NURSING

Needs assessment is no longer a novel idea in the administration of continuing education programs in nursing. Most continuing education programs have adopted and implemented to a greater or lesser extent some variation of a needs assessment. In order to maximize the utility of a needs assessment several characteristics are necessary. The needs assessment must be conducted in a timely matter, reach the appropriate audiences, possess traits of a well designed instrument and be utilized for decision making. The latter characteristic is the subject at hand. The cost-benefit of a needs assessment cannot be realized unless the results of the needs assessment are used to enhance the marketability of the program. Marketing in continuing education in nursing has often been underestimated in the literature. Marketing is a strategy which identifies consumers needs and wants and seeks to satisfy or fulfill those needs and wants with the appropriate product or service. Implicit in this definition is the role of the needs assessment in marketing. The needs assessments is a marketing research tool that seeks to identify consumers' needs and wants. Hence, the needs assessment is a vehicle for decision making in selecting the marketing strategy for the continuing education program. With the need for efficiency, cost control and effectiveness intensified in continuing education in nursing, the enlightened administrator, as would an effective manager, recognizes the need for going a step beyond the needs assessment to marketing continuing education in nursing.

Before designing a needs assessment, the administrator should consider the informational inputs that are needed to develop a marketing plan and strive to tap essential areas in the needs assessment. This will avoid the need for later having to administer other instruments to answer the relevant questions or having to second guess what the nursing consumer wants. The result will be

the enhancement of the cost-benefit of a needs assessment since more information will be provided in the expense of one instrument as opposed to several. Additionally, the marketing effort will be more cost efficient due to the savings in time and resources necessary to gather information and developing, administering and analyzing a new instrument.

In order for the marketing strategy to be operative it is important that it is comprehended as an on-going process and not a strategy that is implemented one year and forgotten about the next. An on-going marketing approach enables the user to establish a data base for analyzing the markets for continuing education in nursing and hence enhances the ability to make quality decisions in marketing the continuing education programs. As the marketing process is implemented on an on-going basis, the administrator of continuing education in nursing will realize an increased cost-benefit ratio as the process becomes more familiar to personnel and is placed as a job function.

The marketing process begins with examining marketing opportunities and threats, selecting target markets, and developing a competitive positioning strategy. The role of the needs assessment is primarily focussed within these three steps. The important point is that before a marketing plan, objective, and tactics are developed the administrator must first analyze and interpret the results of the needs assessment and other indicators for information on the needs and wants of the nursing consumer.

The first step of the marketing process, examining opportunities and threats involves determining what opportunities and threats exist. The needs assessment, if designed and implemented effectively is an important information source in this respect. The administrator must realize that there are potential opportunities and threats that they are not aware of and the needs assessment can uncover these. For instance, the administrator who designs a workshop for innovative techniques in the agencies and is not aware that there are policies and procedures that preclude using these techniques within the agency unknowingly places a threat on the success of the workshop.

In order to uncover potential opportunities and threats in the market for continuing education in nursing, the instrument must be designed to provide for the expression of new ideas and problems. The administrator should also realize the importance of utilizing other indicators as well. For instance, workshops or seminar evaluations, outcome evaluations, continuing education instructors' input, surveys of hospital administrators, and the current nursing literature can provide for identifying opportunities and threats in the market for continuing education in nursing. For example, the literature is often the first source for new research techniques which if investigated could be an opportunity for a workshop that the needs assessment may not have specified.

It is of additional importance that the administrator of continuing education in nursing be aware that a feasible opportunity or threat exists only if the institution is capable of fulfilling the opportunity or altering the threat. For example, a threat that an agency is relocating would be unalterable by the administrator, however, a threat that the scheduling time of a forthcoming workshop is not suitable for the potential participants could be alterable by the administrator if flexibility in scheduling exists.

In developing the marketing plan, the nursing administrator of continuing education should establish mechanisms for record keeping of the information provided by the various indicators of opportunities and threats so that the orderly collection is provided for on a yearly basis. In this way those that are substantiated year after year will be identified easily.

Selecting a target market, the second step of the process, can only be achieved after identifying all potential markets, quantifying those markets by putting a number on the size of the market and identifying those in which the market's needs are capable of being best fulfilled by the organization. Again, the needs assessment is a valuable input into developing the marketing plan. If the needs assessment identifies a salient need and taps demographics of respondents, it is then possible to identify or isolate the demographics of the

respondents who are a potential target market. Focusing on a target market is an important marketing technique which has practical applications in continuing education in nursing. Most often continuing education offerings are not designed to be appropriate for all nurses but for a subgroup of the nursing population. Yet they are often marketed as if they are applicable to everyone. If effort is focused on reaching the target market for the offering a more cost efficient and a more effective marketing endeavor will be the result. The marketing endeavor will be more effective since those nursing consumers who are potential participants will be reached and cost efficiency is achieved since the marketing budget will not be wasted in reaching nursing consumers who would not be interested in and would not benefit by the particular workshop.

If a continuing education workshop on "Management of Nursing Faculty" is offered it should be marketed to nursing administrators only since they would be the feasible target market. The marketing plan should outline strategies to elicit this market in particular. This could be achieved through various ways: constructing and focusing the brochure to attract this market, distributing materials at Dean's meetings, collating administrators from the current mailing list, or obtaining mailing lists from nursing administrators' journals. The number of marketing strategies that can be utilized depends upon the individual institution and their cost constraints. For instance a large institution could afford an expensive brochure and advertising in journals while a smaller institution with a limited budget would focus on obtaining mailing lists and designing an inexpensive brochure, yet one that would attract the market.

It should be stressed that if as many strategies as possible are utilized the result will most likely be more participants which in the long run will outweigh the cost of the marketing endeavors.

A competitive analysis is an information seeking process to gain knowledge in what other providers of continuing education in nursing are offering. The needs assessment can also provide information in this regard if it is designed to elicit the consumer's knowledge and perceptions of other providers. This information is useful in examining institutional strengths and weaknesses. Then those strengths that are superior to other institutions should be capitalized upon. Strengths can be faculty expertise, facilities of the institution or time flexibility. The administrator of continuing education in nursing should then position the program so that it fulfills those needs which the institution is best capable of fulfilling in comparison to other institutions. For example, other institutions may be fulfilling the strong need for stress management workshops, however, there may also be a need for personnel evaluation workshops which is not being met by any institution. If the institution has the resources to fulfill this need this would be a strong competitive position for the institution since they will forego the cost of competing and a larger market exists to entice more participants which will offset the cost of the workshop.

Of course as in the other two steps of the marketing process other information sources should be considered. For example, brochures received by faculty, advertisements in nursing journals and newspapers, clearing houses and contacts with nursing administrators can all provide information on what other institutions are offering.

After these three steps, market opportunity analysis, selection of target markets and competitive positioning strategy are completed then the marketing plan can be developed. The objectives of the institution should become apparent and flow from the previous marketing analysis. For instance, if the marketing analysis identifies the need for a post masters workshop in administrative techniques an objective to fulfill this need should evolve. Objectives should be written so that they are obtainable in order for goals and measurement of goal achievement to be derived from the objective.

Other considerations must be the development of systems to implement the marketing plan, the delegation of duties for plan implementation and establishment of controls to ensure expected results are being achieved.

The marketing plan should outline the results of the marketing analysis, more specifically, the major opportunities and threats, the most feasible target markets and the institution's positioning compared to other providers within the nursing continuing education market.

Other ingredients of the marketing plan include the goals and objectives of the institution in the short and long run. Outlines of the strategies and tactics to be employed to achieving the goals and objectives, criteria for measurement of goal achievement and a budget for the marketing endeavor.

In summary, a set of guidelines for conducting a comprehensive yet cost efficient marketing analysis that incorporates yet extends beyond needs assessment per se include: (1) Design the needs assessment to answer the marketing questions:

a. What market opportunities and threats exist?
b. What are the most feasible target markets for the organization?
c. What should be the competitive position of the organization?

(2) Implement the marketing analysis on an on-going basis and initiate mechanisms for the implementation.

(3) Utilize all information sources available in conducting the analysis:

a. needs assessment
b. hospital administrators
c. continuing education instructors
d. nursing literature
e. evaluations
f. brochures and literature from other continuing education in nursing providers

(4) Consider only those market opportunities that the institution is capable of fulfilling and only those target markets that the institution is capable of reaching.

(5) Seek to identify the characteristic or demographics of the target market for subsequent development of a specific strategy for reaching this market in the marketing plan.

(6) Provide for the orderly collection of the results of the marketing analysis so that a data base for subsequent years is formalized for use in making comparisons, obtaining validating in trends and for the expansion in new areas.

and

(7) Keep a cost efficiency perspective when considering alternative strategies in conducting the marketing analysis.

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ABSTRACT

Beyond Needs Assessment To Marketing
Continuing Education In Nursing

Needs Assessment is no longer a novel idea in the administration of continuing education programs in nursing. Most continuing education programs have adopted and implemented to a greater or lesser extent some variation of a needs assessment. Unfortunately, the full potential of the results of these efforts have not been realized in that most administrators of continuing education programs in nursing have not gone a step beyond to employing an operative marketing strategy to further delineate target markets, their location, and how best their needs identified as a result of the needs assessment can be fulfilled.

The prevalence of the need for marketing in continuing education in nursing is justifiable considering the growing pressures for efficiency and economies of scale in this field of higher education. This paper critically analyzes the current utilization of needs assessment in continuing education programs in nursing. It is argued that the cost benefit of a needs assessment can only be realized when the needs assessment is utilized as a framework for subsequent development of a total marketing scheme. More specifically, the paper discusses and illustrates by example, strategies for how a marketing plan can be employed in continuing education programs in nursing in order to: (1) define objectives; (2) examine opportunities and threats; and (3) perform situation and competitive analysis, with relatively low cost to the administrator of continuing education. In this manner it is possible to achieve a more desirable balance between organizational and market needs. A set of guidelines are presented for conducting a comprehensive yet cost efficient marketing analysis to serve as a basis for decision making in a continuing education program in nursing.